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15 November 1984

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Talking Points for DCI Meeting with PFIAB on  
Monday, 19 November 1984

SUBJECT: Nicaragua, and the Contras

KEY JUDGMENTS FROM SNIE 83.3-84

NICARAGUA: IMPLICATIONS OF THE MILITARY BUILDUP

-Over the last five years, the Sandinista regime has embarked on a major military buildup, primarily with substantial Soviet Bloc and Cuban assistance. As a result, it has developed the largest and best-equipped military force in Central America. The ground and air defense forces are predominant, while the air and naval forces are small and poorly equipped. The overall buildup is primarily defense-oriented, but it nevertheless has upset the regional military balance and represents a growing potential threat to its immediate neighbors. As in the case of Cuba, it also provides a shield behind which the Sandinistas can continue to consolidate their regime and support other regional revolutionaries.

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-The arms buildup has accelerated during the last year. The Soviet Union this month delivered a major weapons system--the MI-24 helicopter gunship--directly to Nicaragua for the first time. This action has important symbolic implications and represents a Soviet decision to play a more direct role in

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strengthening the Sandinista regime. During 1984, the inventory of tanks and armored vehicles has doubled, and the basis has been laid for a significantly improved air defense system.

-Although U.S. demarches appear to have so far deterred the delivery of MIGs or other advanced jet aircraft, the Sandinistas remain determined to acquire them. In the interim, the likely acquisition of advanced surface-to-air (SAM) missile systems and other air defense improvements will provide a protective umbrella for future deliveries of additional weaponry, potentially including combat aircraft as well.

-The some 3,000 Communist military and security personnel in Nicaragua, predominately Cubans, play a key role in supporting and maintaining the Sandinista armed forces. This role is likely to increase in the future as Nicaragua obtains more sophisticated weaponry, making Managua yet more dependent on Moscow and Havana. Should Cuban pilots operate the recently-acquired Soviet MI-24 helicopter gunships, as they do in Angola, this would represent the first known direct combat role for the Cubans in Nicaragua.

-We believe that the USSR seeks to use military assistance to consolidate the regime in Managua and to establish a center of Soviet influence on the Central American mainland. From the

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Sandinistas' perspective, Soviet and Cuban aid serves to raise the costs to the U.S. of a major attack and enhances their ability to defend against lesser threats. We believe that Moscow will continue to probe the limits of U.S. tolerance for delivery of additional weapons systems, including jet combat aircraft, much as it has done in Cuba.

-The Nicaraguan military buildup serves other Soviet and Cuban interests as well. It diverts U.S. attention and resources from other critical areas and complicates U.S. force planning. It ensures a key base for the support of other regional insurgent and terrorist groups and intimidates Nicaragua's neighbors. By assisting in the consolidation of a Marxist-Leninist government, it encourages other leftist movements in the region. Such consolidation, moreover, may provide the Soviets the opportunity to establish secure intelligence collection facilities, especially for SIGINT, as well as access to Sandinista air and naval facilities.

-The Sandinistas have indicated they would be willing to accept a Contadora Treaty which would limit the military buildup and the number of foreign military advisers in the region. In doing so, they seek the removal of U.S. military bases and schools from Central America and an end to U.S. military

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exercises. They clearly hope to use the Treaty to further legitimize the regime and to end any foreign interference in their domestic affairs that would hinder political consolidation. Nevertheless, they are resisting the inclusion of effective verification measures, and will continue to support a clandestine Cuban military presence and provide materiel aid to regional insurgents. Should the Treaty process fail, they are likely to continue their military buildup unabated.

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